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C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 001757

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: MINORITY HEAVYWEIGHTS COME OUT FOR
OPPOSITION

REF: COLOMBO 1730

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

¶1. (U) At separate press conferences on October 5 Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) head Arumugam Thondaman and Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauff Hakeem announced their parties' support for United National Party (UNP) presidential candidate Ranil Wickremesinghe. The CWC accompanied its announcement with a 19-point "proposal" for a Wickremesinghe government, including devolution of power, "a mutually beneficial" relationship with India, and "proper implementation" of incumbent President Kumaratunga's agreement on tsunami aid coordination (also known as "P-TOMS") with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In his press conference, the SLMC's Hakeem identified Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) candidate Mahinda Rajapakse's electoral alliances with the Sinhalese nationalist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) as serious obstacles to supporting a Rajapakse ticket. Hakeem also cited the failure of the current SLFP government to redevelop more efficiently and equitably (predominantly Muslim) tsunami-stricken areas in the east. Finally, Hakeem reportedly claimed that Wickremesinghe had guaranteed separate Muslim representation at future peace talks. (Note: We have not verified this claim with the UNP.)

¶2. (SBU) Besides the CWC and SLMC, the UNP appears to have netted support from the Upcountry People's Front (UPF), which, like the CWC, represents Indian Tamil estate workers. (Unlike CWC, however, the UPF has a strong pro-LTTE tinge to its politics.) K.T. Kurusamy, a UPF Municipal Councilor, told us that his party had also signed an agreement with Wickremesinghe on October 5. The total Indian Tamil vote is estimated at just under 1 million--most of which is now expected to go to the UNP candidate--of 13.3 million registered voters. (Comment: The Muslim vote is far less monolithic. SLMC estimates--which may be inflated--put its party's vote bank at 500,000.)

¶3. (C) Comment: As expected, the minority vote appears thus far to be lining up solidly behind the UNP's Wickremesinghe. The great unknown remains, however, what role the LTTE may play. The LTTE's "get-out-the-vote" effort is fairly straightforward: the Tigers either give the estimated 600,000 or so voters living in their territory permission to go to polling booths in government-controlled territory (where Tamil voters would likely vote overwhelmingly for the pro-devolution Wickremesinghe) or they do not (thus indirectly benefiting the SLFP's Rajapakse). The pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has so far resisted tipping its hand, as have our other LTTE-sympathizing contacts. While logic would suggest that the LTTE would be happiest with a UNP victory, the Tigers have shown us time and again that they do not always follow the ostensibly logical path. Unlike the last election, in which the candidates' positions on the peace process did not differ markedly, Rajapakse's decision to ally himself with the nationalist, anti-devolution JVP and JHU presents the voters with a far starker choice. The Tigers' August 12 assassination of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar raised obvious questions about their sincerity in seeking a negotiated settlement to the conflict. Whom the Tigers decide to support in the November 17 election will provide a still clearer indication of LTTE intentions in the peace process.
LUNSTEAD